



# **Catholic Faith, Life & Creed**

Doctrinal Catechesis Sessions for adults based on  
the Church Year, the Liturgy, & the Sunday Scriptures

## **Breaking Open the Word**

by Mary Birmingham

## **Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time A**



Parable of the Sower by James Tissot



## Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### Opening Prayer

Option 1. Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2.

### *Knowing, Loving and Serving God*

*Almighty and Eternal God,  
You are the light of the mind that knows you,  
the joy of the heart that loves you,  
and the strength of the soul that serves you.  
May we know you  
so that we may truly love you.  
May we love you  
so we can fully serve you;  
For in serving you is to live in perfect freedom,  
in Jesus Christ our Lord.*

*Adapt. By St. Augustine of Hippo*

Catholic  
**Faith, Life  
& Creed**  
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Breaking Open the  
Word worksheets  
connect with *Catholic  
Faith, Life, & Creed*  
Doctrinal Sessions.

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## Liturgical Context

- ▶ The Fifteenth through the Seventeenth Sundays are inherently related to one another.
- ▶ Chapter thirteen of Matthew's Gospel is read over these three Sundays. Chapter thirteen includes the parables known as the Discourse Parables.
- ▶ The first readings of these Sundays prepare us for the Gospel.
- ▶ The Gospel echoes what is necessary in the lives of believers if God's word has any chance of taking root.
- ▶ God's word is manifest, active and alive when it is proclaimed in the liturgy of the word. The General Instruction to the Roman Missal reminds us: "Through his word, Christ himself is present in the assembly of his people".
- ▶ God is present to us today as we continue to reflect on that word.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one of the readings.

## First Reading: Isaiah 55: 10-11

- ▶ The *word* of God is a star player in today's reading from the prophet Isaiah. He envisions a time of feasting and a time in which life-giving water will flow over the people.
- ▶ The *word* functions like a sacrament; it is a sign of God's presence.
- ▶ Salvation flows like living water from God's holy *word*.
- ▶ God's *word* is proactive; God's *word* initiates the work of salvation.
- ▶ God's *word* is a *happening*—not something to be read, but something to be lived; it is alive.
- ▶ God's *word* will accomplish what God set out to accomplish.
- ▶ Israel will be restored and brought home to a New Jerusalem in which sin and death will be no more.
- ▶ God will restore Eden and the shalom of Paradise will reign once again.
- ▶ The concept of *word* as an event or happening is encapsulated in the Hebrew word *dabar* that implies the joining of word with action.
- ▶ Ultimately *dabar* is an action word.
- ▶ God's prophet speaks the *word* and God acts.
- ▶ God's word is revelatory; it reveals God's plan of salvation through the generations.
- ▶ God's *word* functions much like the sun and the rain. Just as the sun and rain allows the seed to take root and sprout, so too God's word brings faith to birth in the life of believers.
- ▶ God's *word* is effective. God speaks and things happen.
- ▶ Isaiah uses the image of thirst and hunger as metaphors for humanity's spiritual need for God.

- ▶ Isaiah is speaking God's word to the exiled Israelites in this chapter.
- ▶ It was generally understood that all the events of life (the good and bad events) were brought about by God's intervention.
- ▶ Good events were cause for rejoicing and were considered rewards for righteous living.
- ▶ Bad events, on the other hand, were believed to be punishment for the sin and apostasy of the people. The exile was understood as a result of the sin of the people of Israel—their failure to live the covenant.
- ▶ Thus the people of Israel are exhorted to recognize their culpability and to acknowledge that their hunger and thirst will be satisfied when they repent and return to covenant relationship with God.
- ▶ The metaphor Isaiah uses images God's word as water and snow and the people as the land. God's water/snow (word) accomplishes what it is intended to accomplish; it causes life and growth on the land (people).
- ▶ God's word invites complete and total metanoia—a return to reciprocal, covenant living with God.



## Mystagogy

### reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two, and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story from his or her life.

- ▶ What is the Good News in this reading?
- ▶ Have you ever thirsted or hungered for God? Please explain.
- ▶ What does Isaiah teach us about our thirst and hunger for God? Have you ever experienced what Isaiah teaches?
- ▶ Have you ever experienced God accomplishing what God set out to accomplish? What does it mean to you that God's word is active and alive? In what way if any has God's word been operative in your own life?

## Second Reading: Romans 8: 18-23

- ▶ Agriculture images and metaphors are resplendent in today's liturgy.
- ▶ Paul refers to the harvest as the first fruits of the Spirit. What does that mean?
  - The Spirit cultivates the faith of believers.
  - The Spirit affects a harvest of faith.
  - The Spirit groans within each soul.
  - In other words, the Spirit is in constant prayer in the heart of each believer.
  - The Spirit knows what prayer should be on the lips of every believer and thus prays that prayer on his or her behalf.
  - The Spirit prays within each person even when he or she is unaware of the Spirit's prayer.

- ▶ Paul reminds believers that no matter what is suffered on this earth it is nothing compared to the joy of union with God and our participation in the cross and resurrection of Christ.
- ▶ Paul further reminds us that we are no longer bound by sin. As a result of Christ's sacrificial death and resurrection we have been freed from the lasting effects of sin.
- ▶ When Christians experience metanoia—a turning of their lives toward Christ—they become conscious of the Spirit who takes up permanent dwelling within them.
- ▶ The suffering of this age pales in comparison to the joy of eternal life with God.
- ▶ Our response to so great a gift is absolute awe.
- ▶ Paul encourages believers to hold fast to their belief in Christ as they look toward that future day of beatific vision and unalterable, eternal joy with God forever.



## Mystagogy

### reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story or reflection from his or her life.

- ▶ How is this Good News for us today?
- ▶ Have you ever experienced the joy of Christ's love to such an extent that you can understand what Paul is saying about the sufferings of today being transitory and small in comparison to the joy of eternal life? What are the implications of this truth for your life?
- ▶ Have you ever experienced the Spirit of God praying within you? What evidence might there be in your life of this truth that Paul is teaching us today?

## Gospel: Matthew 13: 1-23 or 13:1-9

- ▶ In today's Gospel Matthew asserts Jesus' teaching authority by the very locus of his teaching. He places Jesus by the shore in a sitting position as he teaches the crowds, the same position Moses assumed as he taught the Law to the people.
- ▶ The sitting position is considered a place of teaching authority in rabbinic Judaism.
- ▶ Jesus' mission in Matthew's Gospel is to proclaim the Good News to the House of Israel—the Jewish people.
- ▶ Thus, he uses images, metaphors and religious concepts that are recognizable to every good Jew.
- ▶ Matthew's concern was to legitimate Jesus' teaching and messianic authority to the people of Israel.
- ▶ Today's parable is taken from the common agricultural culture of Galilee.
- ▶ The parable of the sower would have immediately captured the imagination of the farmers that were no doubt plentiful in that part of the world.



- ▶ Parables always have a hook—a “gotcha” moment—an unexpected turn that invites a new way of looking at what at first glance seemed common enough, but after further investigation turned the expected upside down.
- ▶ At first glance it would seem that the sower is the lead actor in this parable. Things are not always as they seem, however.
- ▶ The seed is the principle player; the seed takes center stage.
- ▶ Herein lies the hook.
- ▶ Listeners would have been horrified at the disorganized manner in which the seed was planted. No self-respecting farmer would scatter the seed in such a haphazard manner—especially amidst thorns and uncultivated land. It was no wonder that the yield was poor. The lack of harvest would hardly have been a surprise. Where then does the surprise come into play?
- ▶ The surprise is the yield produced by the good soil. The harvest was greater than anyone could have conceived. The harvest produced up to ten times greater than would have been expected.
- ▶ Jesus wants his listeners to understand that God was doing a mighty work right under their noses!
- ▶ The seed that fell on good ground represented those who were open to hearing God’s word and willing to allow it to take root in their lives.
- ▶ Those who were closed to God’s word would not have been open to it anyway no matter what the impetus.
- ▶ The question believers must ask is: “When are we closed and deaf to hearing God’s word in our lives?”
- ▶ Very often the trials and challenges of life make us deaf and blind to hear and see God’s action in the midst of our suffering.
- ▶ People are deaf and blind to God’s work in their lives when God has not been given priority in their lives—when little or no effort is given to give God his due honor, praise and worship.
- ▶ People are blind to God’s work in their lives when they turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to the plight of the poor and oppressed in our world.



## Mystagogy

### reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites the participants to respond to one or more of the following questions.

- ▶ Close your eyes for just one moment and ask God to reveal to you the stony areas of your heart---where in your life will you not let God in?
- ▶ Name a time in your life when you possessed a stony heart.
- ▶ When have you turned a deaf ear to God?
- ▶ In what ways do you resist God’s invitation to be in intimate loving relationship with you?

- ▶ Jesus insisted that the parables were not intended to fool or trick people. They did however require faith on the part of the listener.
- ▶ The parables only made sense through eyes of faith.
- ▶ Jesus was able to interpret the parables for his followers because they already had a certain level of understanding through their faith in him.
- ▶ People who are closed, cold and unresponsive logically do not understand the underlying principles that underpin the parables.
- ▶ Jesus did not speak to the people in parables as if a foreign language in order to confound and confuse the people; they already refused to understand and would not have understood no matter what he told them.
- ▶ People are responsible for their own arrogant resistance to God's word.
- ▶ They refuse to listen and repent and as a result parables simply compound their ignorance as they lack the necessary openness and receptivity required to understand.
- ▶ Jesus manifested the kingdom out in the open. Nothing was kept secret. Yet in spite of Jesus' attempts to extend the reign of God to Israel, they simply refused to accept it.
- ▶ Jesus' own relatives were embarrassed by him.
- ▶ The parables illustrate the people's inability to comprehend Jesus' message and his mission.
- ▶ Reasons for the failure of the seed to take root are suggested:
  - the Pharisees resistance,
  - the people's lack of spiritual knowledge,
  - the manipulations of Satan,
  - the inability to remain steadfast in the midst of suffering and persecution
  - the attraction of material goods.
- ▶ Ultimately the fault lies in the spiritual malaise and hardness of heart of those who listen to the word.
- ▶ Sowing was an image of God's salvific work. Thus parable was therefore intended to alert Israel that God's work of restoring the new Israel had begun, the final messianic age had arrived. How said it is that those primary people for whom it was intended missed it altogether.
- ▶ Jesus is the sower in the parable; the great work of the ultimate Sower had arrived.
- ▶ Jesus quotes Isaiah and in the process reminds his readers that the rejection of God's word was also part of God's plan; the prophets foretold it.
- ▶ One could infer from Matthew's Gospel that God keeps some of the mysteries of the kingdom hidden from some people. Scholars suggest that this simply affirms that it is God's decision to choose whom he wishes to choose. It is God's election, not ours.
- ▶ Those who listen and believe the Good News are privileged and greater than all the prophets who preceded them.

- ▶ Such disciples are exhorted to take the word they have received with them out into the world. They are to become hearers and doers of the word. They are to become God's word by the witness of their lives. They are called to harvest the first fruits of their evangelical witness.



## Mystagogy

### reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life. See appendix #3 for an example.

- ▶ What are the primary themes in this Gospel?
- ▶ In what way does this parable speak to us today?
- ▶ What are the implications of this parable for our Christian lives?
- ▶ What does it mean to you that you are to become the word in your every day life?
- ▶ In what way have you become the word for others in your own world?
- ▶ Have you ever experienced God's word as active, alive and spoken just for you and or your community? Explain.
- ▶ When you consider reasons for the failure to take root that were cited in the Gospel, what are some reasons today for the word failing to take root in the life of people? What are some common obstacles? What are some obstacles in your own life?
- ▶ If this parable is the sign of the last age and the establishment of the reign of God, how have you experienced the seed being sown in your pastoral setting?
- ▶ What does this Gospel teach us about the Christian mission?

Catechist invites participants to silently reflect on the following question.

- ▶ After reflection on today's liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God's call?

## Concluding Prayer

Repeat OPENING PRAYER for this session OR  
Minor rite: Blessing: 95-97.



## APPENDIX

- If this parable is the sign of the last age and the establishment of the reign of God, how have you experienced the seed being sown in your pastoral setting?

I am privileged to be part of an amazing community. The seed is sown day in and day out in ways too numerous to mention. Our liturgy and our worship is alive and life giving. Our parish gives a half million dollars to the world's poor each year. Nearly a thousand people have been renewed through parish renewal programs of various sorts from small Christian faith sharing groups, to Christ Renews His Parish, Just Faith, Bible study, Why Catholic? and many other faith enrichment groups.

The heart of the community's faith is evidenced by its outreach. The parish maintains a social concerns building that reaches out to poor people in our local area and works to address their needs situationally as well as systemically.

Our parish is a beacon in the community when it comes to vocal advocacy for the homeless. We are primary supporters of a local shelter for homeless women and their children and a daily soup kitchen.

Seeds of faith are planted, watered and harvested each and every day. The community then gathers on Sunday to be filled, fertilized, watered and nourished so the word can go out one more week and minister to God's people.

The word no doubt falls on stony ground even within this amazing community. I daresay it is bound to happen in every community. However, when such a large majority of people have been touched and transformed by God's word they overshadow those who complacently refuse to allow the word to impact their lives on any meaningful level.

One need only look to the outreach of any community to discern whether or not the word has fallen on stony or fertile ground. I thank God each day for my community. I thank God for gifting us with his holy, transformative word.



# Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's  
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Holy Spirit  
Salvation  
Faith  
Scripture and Revelation I or II

Creed  
Evangelization  
Eucharist Series

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

## HOLY SPIRIT

Paul reminds the Romans that the Holy Spirit affects the harvest of faith in believers. The Spirit prays within the hearts of believers and is active in their lives even when they are unaware of the Spirit's action or indwelling. The Spirit prays in the hearts of God's children even when they are unable or do not know how to pray. It is thus appropriate that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about the HOLY SPIRIT.

## SALVATION/SOTERIOLOGY

The parable of the seed is a reminder that God plants the seeds, waters it and brings it to fulfillment. It is a wonderful metaphor to describe the salvation that is ours through Jesus Christ. We are saved by God's initiative. God plants the seed, waters it and brings us to new life in him. This liturgy is an invitation to focus our attention on what the Church teaches about SALVATION/SOTERIOLOGY

## FAITH

God plants, the seed, waters it and brings us to faith in him. It is our responsibility to respond to God's initiative by our faith and works. Today's liturgy is a call to focus our attention on deep conversion to Christ and the call the faith. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about FAITH.

## SCRIPTURE AND REVELATION I or II

Isaiah tells us that God's word will go forth. Isaiah understands God's word as an event in salvation history. God's word is a living word and will accomplish what God intends it to accomplish. Another word for Isaiah's understanding of God's word is Divine Revelation. Jesus is the revelation of God. God reveals himself to us through his Son. He also reveals himself to us through Sacred Scripture. Matthew's primary thesis is to preach

Jesus—the revelation of God. God speaks to us through his Word and reminds of us the God/human relationship since the beginning of time. Today’s liturgy is an invitation to focus our attention on what the Church teaches about REVELATION.

### **CREED**

Jesus is the great Teacher. He is the revelation of God. We hinge our faith on his life, his teaching and what he revealed to us about God and God’s message to us. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention on what we profess as Christians. What does Jesus teach us that elicits our profession of faith when we proclaim the Creed at every mass? Let us today focus our attention on what the Church teaches us about the NICENE CREED.

### **EVANGELIZATION**

Jesus taught his disciples that they are truly blessed to see, hear and believe what has been revealed to them. He insists that those who accept the teaching he passed on to them are greater than all the prophets who went before them. Disciples are to go out, take what they have been taught and gather others into God’s harvest—the kingdom of God. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about EVANGELIZATION.

### **EUCCHARIST SERIES:**

Our premier celebration of the Paschal Mystery—the life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension sending of the Spirit is made manifest and re-presented for us in the Eucharistic liturgy. Thus any Sunday would be an appropriate time to focus our attention on the Eucharistic liturgy. Today we will focus on part \_\_\_\_ of the Eucharistic Series.